

The City

Attacking Modern Myths

Edited by Alan Powell

for the University League for Social Reform

Chapter 20

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Private Politics, Citizen Politics, and the Public

Stephen Clarkson

1972

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Contents

Foreword 7

Introduction 9

Section 1—Housing

Introduction 19

1. High-Rise vs. No Rise: The Municipal Cost-Benefit Equation/ *Leon R. Kentridge and Peter F. Oliphant* 25
2. Please Feel Free/ *Peter Such* 36
3. The Zoning Law as Icon/ *Richard Lay* 39
4. Low-Income Housing in Ontario: Some Hidden Agendas and Basic Beliefs/ *Susan A. Fish* 47
5. Challenging an Urban Myth: Chile's Unique Strategy for Low-Income Housing/ *Anastasia Shkilnyk* 61

Section 2—Neighbourhoods and Participation

Introduction 73

6. The Case of the Friendless Urbanite/ *Jack Wayne* 80
7. From *First Elegy*/ *Dennis Lee* 93
8. Who Needs Neighbourhoods? / *Barry Wellman* 94
9. Planning vs. Development: Placing Bets on Toronto's Future/ *Graham Fraser* 101
10. Spadina/ *Dennis Lee* 114
11. Cable T.V. as De-Mystifier: Community Control of Cable Television/ *Bruce Lawson* 115

Section 3—Social Services and Crime

Introduction 127

12. Social Planning or Social Control: An Account of a Confrontation with the Social Welfare Establishment/*Howard Buchbinder* 131
13. Night on Skid Row/*Miriam Waddington* 161
14. Lucky Who? The United Community Fund of Greater Toronto/*John McCready* 163
15. Tensions Within an Urban Profession: Adjustment or Change/*D. C. Cowley* 176
16. "Crime Is Over if You Want It"/*Peter MacNaughton-Smith* 187

Section 4—Technocrats

Introduction 193

17. Policy Planning for Urban Affairs/*N. H. Lithwick* 200
18. The Care and Feeding of an Airport, or, The Technocrat as Midwife/*Gerald Hodge* 210
19. Responsibility, Bureaucracy, and the Long View/*Hans Blumenfeld* 220
20. Private Politics, Citizen Politics, and the Public/*Stephen Clarkson* 225
21. From *Party Day*/*Jack Winter* 234
22. One Alternative to Technocracy/*The Counterfoil Group* 235

Section 5—Two Concluding Papers

23. The City: Putting a Good Face on a Bad Scene/*Brewster Kneen* 247
24. The Politics of Radical Hope: Attacking the Myth of Moreness/*Eilert Frerichs* 257

About the Editor 265

About the Contributors 266

Other Publications of the University League for Social Reform 272

20. Private Politics, Citizen Politics, and the Public

Stephen Clarkson

It is part of modern folklore to rail against the bureaucrats. "Bureaucratic" conjures up visions of red tape, infuriating line-ups, sterile waiting rooms, and arrogant functionaries. Once one can accept the possibility that bureaucrats can be people, one is only at first base in the process of remythologizing bureaucracy. Two more important issues revolve around making the private world of bureaucratic politics accountable to the public and making bureaucratic expertise available to citizens groups.

1. Making the Bureaucrat Publicly Accountable

We all know the theory of representative democracy. Decisions concerning the public good are made by men and women chosen by popular suffrage in periodical elections to administer the affairs of state. If their decisions do not meet with the approval of the public, they can be replaced at the next election by others more adequately reflecting popular desires. Even if most of us profess that this is the way things should be, few of us would actually claim that this is the way politics really works. The election campaign, for one thing, is far too blunt an instrument of decision to resolve even so black-and-white an issue as the fate of Toronto's Spadina Expressway, let alone the myriad problems that do not manage to work to the surface as issues at election campaigns. Even when elected, the people's representative in government very rarely has any sense that he controls the levers of power. Much, perhaps half, of this time, is spent as an amateur social worker, servicing the individual needs of constitu-

ents who telephone, write, and visit him, demanding help in their personal, family, or business problems. A good portion of the rest of his time is spent running his business, maintaining a skeleton law practice, or otherwise keeping a foot in his professional world as insurance against eventual electoral defeat. That fraction of his public time which can be devoted to consideration of policy is rarely used to control the decision-making process. If he is a freshman, the politician will have to spend some time in learning the ropes. If he is in the Opposition, he will necessarily be excluded from important sources of information and so prevented from playing more than a watchdog role. Even if he is in the government, he will not have much left unless he is actually among the select few in the cabinet. But being in the executive does not necessarily put the politician in full control. Cabinet ministers' life expectancy in one department is a few years at the best of times. Often, in minority or weak governments, it may be a few months, hardly time to do more than approve documents prepared by the senior civil servants. In post-war France when ministerial turnover reached record-breaking rates such decisions as were made were done by the civil service in areas not thought to be too contentious. Where controversy was high, decisions were simply not made. In the opposite case of one-party regimes, the distinction between elected representative and civil servant virtually disappears. It is very difficult, for instance, to distinguish a senior civil servant at Queen's Park from his alter ego in the cabinet, so much have the activities of the Ontario Government become identified with the Conservative Party.

At the level of city politics, one might think that the situation is far better. After all, not having party politics means there is no Opposition twiddling its thumbs on one side and no backbenchers looking on in frustration on the other. Furthermore, the executive has nothing like the formal authority of the parliamentary cabinet since Council must ratify every decision although the informal alliances between the executive and the commissioners does leave Council as weak as parliament. In actual fact, the situation is far worse. Power is so fragmented among different bodies that no elected politician is ever able to control policy-making in as comprehensive a way as does cabinet in parliament. In Toronto fifty percent of the senior alderman's time is spent in his local council which has twenty per cent of the budgetary power. Less than a quarter of the municipally elected representatives sit on Metro Toronto Council which has five times the

budgetary power of the area councils. Even so, Metro Council does not control policy made in transportation (itself fragmented between the Toronto Transit Commission, the Toronto Parking Authority, and other bodies), justice (the police commission is another semi-independent board) waterfront development (the harbour commission is a creation both of the federal and municipal jurisdictions but is responsible to neither) or especially education, which is hived off as a totally separate political system with its own electoral mechanism and its own bureaucracy. The whole area of what passes for social planning is theoretically in the private sector with its own obscure system of private policy-making dominated by the United Community Fund and legitimized by the facade of the Social Planning Council's own nominal democracy. Even at the local level power is dispersed, with the planning board's responsibility in implementing the city's official plan again separated from Council, leaving real land use planning power under the influence of private developer interests. The chaotic way in which Council conducts its own business is a further factor perpetuating its own impotence and the unchallenged, if invisible power of the bureaucrat.

In the world of municipal politics, it is symptomatic that the word "civil servant" is not used, but rather "bureaucrat" or, more frequently, "technocrat," for we are talking about the masters of the political process, not the servants. Theirs may be an area of activity better labelled "private politics" as distinct from the "public politics" of elections and council meetings. However invisible it may be to the citizen, it is clear that the decision-makers of the city's political system are the full-time, permanent professionals. Politicians come and go. The bureaucrats stay. Compare the salaries: the senior alderman may receive \$12 to \$15 thousand; the senior civil servant \$20 to \$30 thousand. If knowledge is power, compare the knowledge of someone who has spent fifteen years building up a monopoly of expertise in expressway plans with a politician having fifteen months or even fifty months trying to penetrate the decision-making system. The dispersal of power which works against the public politician, preventing him from getting a total view of the policy-making process, works in favour of the bureaucrat whose network of working relationships cuts across the institutional barriers to focus power informally in his hands. For animating the municipal system is a smoothly operating network of publicly financed bureaucrats and privately employed consultants working in sup-

port of the real estate developers and construction industry. The Metro Planning Commissioner, for instance, may retire from public employment, set up shop as a consultant and use the connections and expertise gained at public expense to help an entrepreneur guide his development project through his old hunting grounds, the bureaucratic maze of City Hall. (Or, to take an actual example in the area of legal expertise; a former North York municipal solicitor discovered that municipally-owned lands, claimed by the borough in the 1930's for failure to pay taxes, could be claimed back by the former owners, heirs, or assignees on payment of back taxes. More than 100 properties, now worth over \$2 million are involved. The former borough solicitor is now acting as counsel for those claimants or their assignees.) The boundary between the government and private sectors becomes blurred. Experts and consultants who are hired to report on a project proposed by City Hall may be the very same people who, in their previous public capacity originated the project. Bureaucrats reporting to Council on the merits of the developer's project may already have piloted certain important but obscure changes through Council in previous months. A traffic light here, a street-widening there may have had no apparent significance to a community at the time but may turn out two years later to have been the thin edge justifying the "completion" of a huge development transforming the neighbourhood from low to high density. Too late for the citizens to protest: progress has already started and how can anyone fight progress?

It is only recently that the legitimacy of this private politics has been challenged or even revealed. Up to now, the public sector has coexisted comfortably with the private, the half-time politician himself becoming absorbed into the system if he did not originally come from the private sector as lawyer, real estate dealer, or actual developer. It is only now that some of the myths of the system are being challenged and documented. The notion of expertise, for instance, has long been synonymous with neutrality and objectivity. But there is no such thing as professional neutrality. As the long arguments pitting consultant against professional over Toronto's Spadina Expressway have proved, there is no sacred objectivity in the expert. While the professional does command certain techniques for analyzing and resolving particular problems, his expertise must always be based on certain assumptions or related to particular parameters. When these

guidelines are not defined for him, the expert is then forced to make political choices on his own. We should not blame Sam Cass (Metro Toronto's Road Commissioner) if his model for Toronto's transportation system is Los Angeles' expressway grid, where no Angelino lives more than three-quarters of a mile from a freeway. The fault lies with the political system that has not defined the priorities of transportation in terms of protecting neighbourhoods, clean air, and public transit. The fact remains, however, that when the expert is not given his scale of priorities by the politicians, he himself must make political choices. With the overwhelming dominance of private politics in the municipal system, it has become the norm, not the exception, for the bureaucrat and the consultant to make these political choices under the guise of technical decisions. But there are very few technical decisions that are not equally political since they effect the use of public resources and the quality of such public goods as the purity of the air and the beauty of the city. Mr. Wronski (Metro Toronto's Planning Commissioner) might think that the Spadina Expressway is "esthetically pleasing," as he maintained in his 1970 report to the Metro Transportation Committee, but there are few people in Toronto's pleasant downtown Annex or the University of Toronto who found much spiritual pleasure in contemplating the concrete ramps and bridges of the proposed Spadina Expressway, which was to cut through the Annex and penetrate the large university campus.

Support for the community group is important but will not resolve the fundamental problems posed by the invisible world of private politics in Metro. However qualified the community's pool of expertise may be, it would only be able to fight the private-bureaucratic network piecemeal and defensively. What is needed are some standards of accountability and a code of ethics so that the bureaucrat and consultant can both act responsibly and be seen by the public to act responsibly. We cannot blithely assume that some of the new urban projects are so big that they must be left to the experts. These developments are now too big for even them to handle competently. Whether it is Toronto's Metro Centre, Harbour City, or the proposed new airport, the repercussions of these "megolopments" make mandatory the opening up of the municipal political process to the public, for they affect all areas of public policy from environmental control to social planning. The multi-dimensional aspects of these projects make their overall impact on the community a quite unpre-

dictable question. How the private political process is made public, whether by elected politicians being on a monster project's controlling board, or by citizens being appointed as public representatives, may have to be decided in each case. What is clear is that technical problems are too important to be left to the experts.

For too long, the real stuff of city politics has gone on in the backrooms of bureaucrat, consultant, and entrepreneur. The issue this raises is the responsibility of the technocrat to the society for which he is ostensibly working. Whether he is hired as a free-lance, as a modern day mercenary, or a publicly paid expert, the technocrat's dilemma is not having any clear responsibility to the public. It is no longer possible for him to pretend not to make political choices. The question is whether bureaucrat and consultant will continue to operate in a private political world or whether their world can be made public.

II. Counter-Bureaucracies for Citizens' Groups

The current concern for participatory democracy attacks the myth of technocratic objectivity by proposing greater citizen involvement in decisions affecting the neighbourhoods and the city as a system. Neighbourhoods operating with new local structures to plan the development of their own area would need funds to employ consultants and bureaucrats with the same expertise as private developers can command.

We are used to pressure groups working on a full-time properly staffed basis to act as lobbies for particular professional or corporate vested interests. We have become accustomed to former executive assistants setting up shop as guides for those with cash on hand needing help to tiptoe through the political and bureaucratic tulips of federal and provincial governments. The unorganized urban citizen finds, however, that the nominally democratic system mysteriously works against him. Even when organized on a voluntary basis as a ratepayers' group protesting a street widening or block-busting, he finds lawyers paid for out of his own taxes being used to support the business interests against him.

Several types of solutions have been proposed and experimented with. The representative democratic system itself is meant to provide the individual citizen with a full-time defendant at each level of government. Even when these representatives do not become the servant of corporate interests rather than the defender of individual rights, they are notably ineffective themselves as

influential voices over the entrenched, permanent civil service. The ombudsman has been instituted in many jurisdictions as a specially people-oriented, bureaucratic Robin Hood. By its nature, this office is a responsive one, reacting to abuses reported to it. Special grievance boards, tribunals, and other para-judicial bodies, like the Ontario Municipal Board together with the judicial system itself, provide the basic means of individuals or groups gaining redress for damage suffered. Open-line shows, special newspaper action columns, better business bureaus, or consumers' organizations also provide a service specialized in particular areas from suicide calls through to emergency plumbing.

Without casting aspersions on these institutions, it is clear that they cannot deal with new issues that urban citizens organized in groups may want to precipitate. Their services are all passive, external to the citizens. They are not so much under the control as at the service of the public-responsive agencies in time of need. Where an individual or group wants to initiate action which may also require prolonged education of neighbours, politicians, and bureaucrats as well as involve continual pressure through the media on the relevant authorities, citizens need continued help that is under *their* control and no one else's.

It takes weeks, months, even years to educate and persuade legislators or bureaucrats about the need for any innovative solution. Even when its objective is achieved, a citizens' group may need to act as a continuing watchdog to supervise the implementation of the established program. The problems may be complicated by the need to relate to all four levels of government on a particular issue, such as welfare or transportation, where the different constitutional levels have varying shares of concurrent authority. As the media provides so much of the communication on major issues, citizens' groups must also direct their attention to monitoring, and, more important, to informing the media. Specific skills of writing, negotiating, marshalling evidence, doing research, presenting briefs, holding press conferences, preparing publicity, are needed for any effort to have successful impact on public officials.

The point is not that individual citizens do not have these skills or cannot acquire them on the political battlelines. The point is rather that people with fulltime jobs don't normally have the time, energy, and financial resources to maintain a politically sophisticated activity over a long enough period. The exceptions prove the rule. In Toronto, SSSOCCC (the Stop Spadina Save

Our City Co-ordinating Committee) was unusually successful in maintaining political activity for ten months (December 1969-August 1970). How? By the devotion and services of middle class intellectuals who were able to stay together on a single, very compelling issue – a problem nowhere near as complex as Toronto's proposed Metro Centre. The required fundraising was difficult but still made possible by the high political salience of the issue – the Spadina Expressway. But community groups do not, and should not, have to meet apocalyptic threats continually, keeping their extra-curricular energies employed to the maximum in collective self-defence.

What is needed? Money is necessary, but not sufficient. What community groups need are specific moral, legal, and human aids besides financial resources. The needed moral resource is a general acceptance that organizing to defend a local interest is legitimately in the public interest, not in some way narrowly reactionary. The necessary legal resource is a set of criteria – possibly established in law – by which a community group can be judged worthy of public financial support. To disqualify the one-man ratepayers' associations and self-appointed groups of concerned citizens, such criteria would lay down simple standards for openness of membership to the community, public accountability of the executive, perhaps even some measure of the group's social importance. The needed human resources are expert staff that can be seconded from the civil service as consultants or planners to help the group resolve its problems. Already this approach has been incorporated in the new organizational structure of metropolitan government in Winnipeg where neighbourhood units can request the full-time services of a city planner who will work according to the neighbourhood's instructions. Such a situation occurred for the first time in Canada almost by accident in the case of Toronto's Trefann Court when a neighbourhood planning group, precariously but successfully worked closely with a brilliant young member of the City's planning staff. Funds would also be required to maintain a small staff to serve the organizational needs of the community groups. The principle at stake is the right for citizens organized in accepted groups to retrieve some of their tax monies for setting up their own staff bureaucracies and employing their own experts when needed. Giving citizens groups these resources could be seen as establishing countervailing powers for the city's communities. It should also be seen as introducing a minimal degree of equity: businesses can finance lobbies to defend their vested interests with money raised by taxing

the public through increased prices. Communities should have the use of a portion of their own tax contributions to defend local public interests.

The bureaucratic law of participatory democracy requires that the system be turned on its head. Experts and staff would serve the community group in its fight to spell democracy as "government by the people."

About the Editor

ALAN POWELL was born in the United Kingdom and has lived, studied, and worked in Canada since 1961. He has taught urban sociology and mass communications at the University of Toronto since 1966 where he is affiliated with two colleges, Erindale and Innis. He was one of the first faculty members at Erindale where teaching began in 1967 and was also active in non-teaching activities. (From 1967 to 1969, he was chairman of the college's Art Committee and began their collection of modern Canadian art.) His cross-appointment at Innis College began in 1971 when he inaugurated a continuing duo of action-oriented undergraduate courses called "Power and Strategy in City Politics."

He has contributed significantly to the style and direction of urban politics in Toronto since 1969 as founding chairman of SSSOCCC (Stop Spadina, Save Our City, Co-ordinating Committee) which played a key part in mobilizing Toronto citizens against the now-stopped Spadina Expressway. Presently, he is a director of the South of St. James Town Defence Fund, urban adviser to Pollution Probe, and a fund raiser and organizer for one of the reform candidates in Toronto's 1972 municipal election. The history of the Spadina battle is one of his current projects together with an almost-completed study in Georgetown, Ontario, of how people experience and participate in their communities.

About the Contributors

HANS BLUMENFELD is an internationally known planner and consultant as well as a prolific writer and radical. He studied architecture in Germany graduating in 1921, and practised briefly as an architect with Adolf Loos. Subsequently, he worked as a planner in Russia for the State Planning Institute in Moscow (1930-37), in New York (1938-40) and Philadelphia (1941-44 and 1953-55), and in Germany (1949). From 1955 to 1961 he was Assistant Deputy Commissioner of Planning in Metropolitan Toronto and developed the Metro Toronto Land Use and Transportation Plan. He was a leading advocate in 1970-71 for the completion of the Spadina Expressway and is still a planning consultant to the cities of Toronto and Montreal. He has taught at Columbia University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and currently lectures at the Universities of Toronto and Montreal, in addition to continuing his private practice as a planning consultant.

HOWARD BUCHBINDER has been associated with Praxis Research Institute for Social Change in Toronto since 1969 and is continuously involved with citizen action and community organizing in the roles of both researcher and activist. He has been lecturing at McMaster University in the School of Social Work (1969-72) and acts as a consultant for the Manitoba government in the areas of urban and social welfare policy and implementation. In 1970-71, he was a member of the reform minority on the Board of Directors of the Metropolitan Toronto Social Planning Council.

STEPHEN CLARKSON teaches in the Department of Political Economy at the University of Toronto. He ran for mayor of Toronto in 1969 and has been on the Board of the Social Planning Council of Metropolitan Toronto. He has just finished a book on municipal politics, *City Lib: Parties and Reform in Toronto*, and has edited two other books, *An Independent Foreign Policy for Canada?* in 1968 for the University League for Social Reform, of which he is now the President, and *Visions 2020: Fifty Canadians in Search of a Future* in 1970 for the *Canadian Forum*.

THE COUNTERFOIL GROUP, a group of young professional people, came together in 1970 after becoming involved in a range of community organizations and educational research. It is presently working on a community education project funded by the Canadian International Development Agency; developing educational programmes and materials associated with a project in the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education; organizing neighbourhood renewal programmes; experimenting with community television; and setting up the "Neighbourhood Centre" in the east end of Toronto. In 1970, the group arranged the University of Toronto's teach-in on "Crisis in Development."

DAVID COWLEY was involved in programme planning as Assistant Director of the Commission on Community Relations for the City of Detroit for four years. Subsequently, he was Director for the Commission on Human Relations at Ann Arbor, Michigan for five years; Director of Community Development for the City of Luansha, Zambia, for one year; and professor at the School of Social work in Community Development at the University of Toronto (1970-72). He has just been appointed Director of Social Welfare for the Province of Saskatchewan.

SUSAN FISH graduated from St. Lawrence University in political science and has an M.A. in public administration from New York University. She has taught courses on urban politics at Atkinson College, York University, and has been a consultant to a government task force on low income housing. At the present time, she is Director of the privately funded Bureau of Municipal Research and also serves as a consultant on urban issues, both at the governmental and community levels.

The City

ATTACKING MODERN MYTHS

EDITED BY ALAN POWELL

for the University League for Social Reform

Riddled with violence, beset by apathy, smothered in smog, choked with traffic—a place where we work but where we cannot live the good life. Must this describe our cities? Here is a group of Canadians who say No! In this unique and controversial collection of articles, essays, poems, and fiction, they examine the Canadian city and the myths we have about it. Housing, social services, neighbourhoods and urban participation, technocracy—all of these present challenges that must be immediately faced if Canadian cities are to become something other than uninhabitable concrete nightmares.

Since 1965, the non-partisan University League for Social Reform has brought together thinkers of all ideological persuasions from different professions and campuses across the country. Each year, the results of these continuing seminars are edited and published as books in order to provoke a wide public discussion of the issues. Although the focus is changed each year, from nationalism to foreign policy, from urban reform to social change, these books and their contributors share a common commitment to progressive reform within an independent Canada.

Alan Powell teaches urban sociology and mass communication in the Department of Sociology at the University of Toronto. He was the founding chairman of the Stop Spadina committee which mobilized Toronto's citizens against the now stopped Spadina Expressway, and is presently urban advisor to Pollution Probe.

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